

# LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION: A LIBRARIAN'S GUIDE TO ISOLATION

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## Abstract

The library and information services profession faces many challenges in developing leaders and leadership potential. Such challenges can be particularly confronting to those living and working in geographically remote regions. This paper uses examples from a geographically remote region in Australia to outline possible approaches to attracting, retaining and developing leaders.

The author fills a senior leadership role at the University of Western Australia (UWA) Library in Perth, one of the most remote capital cities in the world. Attracting, retaining and developing leaders in the library profession in Perth can be challenging.

In response to the challenge of geographic remoteness, the author describes an initiative adopted by the UWA Library to develop leadership. In a fast changing and demanding environment, it is essential that all managers be forward thinking, pro-active and ready to lead others. 'Taking the Lead' is a programme designed to provide continuing professional development opportunities for senior library staff in leadership positions. The author also outlines some of the strategies adopted by the library professional association in Western Australia. The author is convenor of one of the local groups which co-ordinates and communicates strategic professional issues and organises continuing professional development activities state-wide and sector-wide.

## INTRODUCTION

Developing leaders and leadership potential is a particular challenge to the library and information profession. The 'greying' of the profession and the anticipated rate of retirements over the next ten to fifteen years present particular challenges. To geographically remote regions is added the challenge

of physical isolation from peers, colleagues and mentors. This paper explores some of these issues in Western Australia and also examines a particular leadership programme at UWA Library. Some of the key lessons from this programme are identified and shared. Librarians from other geographically remote areas may benefit from hearing what worked and what did not and the impact the programme has had on library staff.

General management and business texts state that the most important skills for leaders are being honest, forward-looking, inspiring, and competent. Mason and Wetherbee<sup>1</sup> outline important leadership skills, including the ability to create a vision for the future, engage others in the co-creation of that vision, describe it in compelling and powerful ways, and create an environment where stakeholders work together productively and effectively to implement the vision successfully. Articles within the library professional literature suggest that leaders should be flexible, energetic, empathetic, wise, creative, courageous, principled, gregarious, determined and possess a sense of humour.

Being or becoming a leader comes naturally to some but others need to learn the necessary skills. Hill<sup>2</sup> observes that “the process of becoming a leader is an arduous, albeit rewarding journey of continuous learning and self-development”. Those aspiring to leadership positions can identify the skills they need and locate appropriate training or other opportunities to assist them in developing these skills. Hill believes that learning to lead is a process of learning by doing, that it cannot be taught in a classroom, but is a craft acquired through on-the-job experiences.

There are significant leadership development opportunities which take place in the workplace.<sup>1</sup> Some people take on ‘acting’ roles to increase their exposure to greater levels of responsibility within the organisation. These can be very useful opportunities to learn new skills and face new challenges, without committing to such a role for an indefinite period.

Leadership is a particular issue within the library profession at present as the number of anticipated retirements over the next ten to fifteen years is significant. In Australia, it is anticipated the population demographics will place pressure on the labour force: “Demographic change will develop into the challenge of replacing skilled older workers from a much smaller pool of younger workers.”<sup>3</sup> Hernon and Schwartz<sup>4</sup> observed that the number of librarians entering the profession cannot match the number of those retiring.

They also noted that “tomorrow’s leaders ... will need the knowledge, experience, and skills to cope with directing institutions and managing change in increasingly complex organisations, constantly evolving services, and an environment of globalization”. Talking about the library profession in Canada, Abram<sup>5</sup> noted that a primary concern was that “of having a sufficient number of adequately trained and experienced staff that could succeed a senior librarian workforce poised to retire in large numbers in Canada over the next five to ten years”.

A collaborative project was initiated in 2006 in Australia to explore this issue. The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) in association with Queensland University of Technology and CAVAL Collaborative Solutions<sup>6</sup> is addressing this concern by commissioning research into workforce planning issues by the ALIA immediate past president, Dr Gillian Hallam. The project aims to foster an awareness of the importance of workforce planning and to develop a collaborative framework for career-long learning for the library profession.<sup>3</sup>

A similar research project was undertaken in Canada in 2004, resulting in the report *8Rs Future of human resources in Canadian libraries*.<sup>7</sup> This study focuses on eight key elements: recruitment, retention, retirement, remuneration, rejuvenation, restructuring, repatriation, and re-accreditation. It emphasises the need to ensure there are sufficient numbers of adequately trained and experienced library and information workers. It also highlights the critical need to rejuvenate mid-level staff who may not have had the opportunity to develop leadership or managerial skills due to hierarchical flattening and organisational down-sizing.

As a result of the significant exodus anticipated from the profession due to retirements, there will be a variety of leadership opportunities for younger members of the profession. It will be important for these younger members of the profession to take up continuing professional development and workplace learning opportunities to ready themselves for these leadership roles. Assuming ‘acting’ positions, arranging secondments, attending relevant training, or undertaking formal continuing education qualifications are all ways to prepare for such opportunities. Those who are willing to go beyond their ‘comfort zones’ will reap the benefits of learning new skills and taking on new challenges.

## BACKGROUND TO WESTERN AUSTRALIA

The library profession in Western Australia faces some particular challenges. Attracting library professionals to Western Australia and retaining those who work there, can be challenging due to the geographic isolation. The state of Western Australia is a vast land mass, covering one third of the continent of Australia. It covers 2,532,400 square kilometres with 12,500 kilometres of coastline, making up 34% of the entire coastline of Australia. As an indication of the size of the state, the UK, Texas and Japan could all be fitted into its borders.<sup>8</sup> The capital city, Perth, located in the south-west of the state, is described as the most isolated capital city in the world and is closer to Jakarta in Indonesia than it is to Sydney. 2,050,000 people live in Western Australia with 1,477,815 in Perth itself.

**Table 1: Distance from Perth to Other Cities**

Perth to:	Km
Adelaide, South Australia	2,716
Brisbane, Queensland	4,363
Canberra, Australian Capital Territory	3,741
Darwin, Northern Territory	4,049
Hobart, Tasmania	3,720
Melbourne, Victoria	3,456
Sydney, New South Wales	3,972
Jakarta, Indonesia	3,004
Singapore	4,722

Geographic remoteness is compounded by the fact that the vast area of Western Australia is not densely populated. Black<sup>9</sup> reports Australian Bureau of Statistics figures which show that at June 2005, capital cities in Australia account for 64% of the nation's population – almost two thirds of the Australian population. He also noted that the areas with the largest or fastest growing population centres in each state and territory tended to be inner cities, outer suburbs and certain regional centres especially those located along the coast. This trend is evident in Western Australia where the highest population centre is clustered around Perth and some regional centres, particularly those along the coast.

Knight<sup>10</sup> investigated the provision of public library services to remote, regional communities and how these areas deal with service withdrawal and population decline. He discovered that the situation in rural New South Wales, Australia had a lot in common with the situations in remote, rural regions of Montana and North Dakota in the United States and in Saskatchewan, Canada.

The library profession in Western Australia incorporates librarians with professional qualifications at either undergraduate or postgraduate level, library technicians who graduate with a diploma, and library aides or officers who receive on-the-job training. Library services are delivered throughout the state from public libraries, special libraries, school libraries, university libraries, and government department libraries. The vast distances and lack of population density in Western Australia create a number of challenges for the library profession. For employers it can present challenges to recruiting and retaining staff with the appropriate skill set. For librarians located in Western Australia the challenge can be combating a sense of isolation and distance from colleagues and training opportunities.

Librarians wishing to maintain their own continuing professional development or those seeking opportunities to develop and demonstrate leadership may find this harder to achieve in geographically remote areas. Shipherd<sup>11</sup> notes that librarians in larger population centres are usually able to pursue a comfortable and satisfying career structure with job advancement without changing other elements in their life style whereas, for librarians in smaller more isolated areas, opportunities for advancement or for change are more limited. Librarians in remote regions tend to be disadvantaged because the region often lacks a critical mass of other library professionals to share knowledge, expertise and provide support and advice. Burke, Dazkiw and Sheridan<sup>12</sup> found that opportunities to move to new positions in a regional area or to build opportunities for career building are limited. Many library staff in a geographically isolated area have chosen to live in the region and are committed for the long term to the locality. Accepting an opportunity to work elsewhere may involve long distance travelling or the relocation of an entire family. These may not be attractive alternatives.

It is important for librarians to experience the stimulation resulting from attendance at conferences and visiting other libraries. Participation in such continuing professional development activities can be limited when the librarian lives in a geographically remote region and travel can be prohibitive both in

terms of cost and time. Leary<sup>13</sup> observed in the case of rural librarians trying to maintain their professional skill level, that many training courses are conducted in capital cities and the cost of accommodation as well as travel can quickly eat away at training funds. Burke, Dazkiw and Sheridan<sup>12</sup> observed a similar issue in their study of the efforts of one university library to encourage opportunity and innovation in the workplace across metropolitan and regional settings.

Schmude<sup>14</sup> notes that one of the key challenges for library staff in a rural setting is coping with the realities of isolation and that geographic remoteness has particular significance for Australia due to the size of the country, the relatively small population, and its pattern of concentrated settlement in the cities and on the coast. He notes that rural librarians tend to lack access to professional development opportunities readily available to their metropolitan counterparts. Cox and Hawke<sup>15</sup> observed that working in isolation can erode morale and diminish effectiveness when there is little opportunity for face-to-face discussion prior to decision-making and no local opportunity for informal discussion of library matters.

There are numerous strategies which can be adopted to overcome or minimise the isolation which may result from living and working in a geographically remote region.

## **TECHNIQUES FOR INDIVIDUALS TO ADDRESS GEOGRAPHIC ISOLATION**

Communication is the key to minimising the disadvantages of geographic isolation. Shipherd<sup>11</sup> describes communication as the ‘oxygen’ needed to maintain professional stimulation for librarians located in geographically remote areas. All forms of communication may be useful: mail, telephone, travel and using the Internet.

Telecommunications obviously play a significant role in minimising the ‘tyranny of distance’. In a study examining the use of the Internet by academic staff at the University of the South Pacific<sup>16</sup>, Mamtola<sup>17</sup> concluded that the majority of respondents considered themselves to be geographically isolated from information resources but that most of them felt connecting to the Internet helped them overcome the isolation.

Peer support is important to all professionals, and the geographically isolated librarian, especially, may feel the lack of physical contact with colleagues. Subscribing to relevant listservs and discussion lists is a useful way to stay in touch with peers and keep on top of relevant and developing issues. While face-to-face interactions might be the favoured method for maintaining professional contacts, for librarians in remote regions of the country, teleconferences, email and other forms of virtual communication are equally useful tools for maintaining contact.

To maintain what Shipherd<sup>11</sup> described as a 'professional edge', it is vital for library staff to develop and maintain professional contacts and to see how other library systems and services operate. When opportunities arise to attend relevant professional conferences, incorporating professional visits to similar organisations may be very useful. In this way individual librarians can extend their own network and maintain that 'professional edge'.

Many universities now offer degrees in a fully online mode. For librarians located in regional and remote areas, enrolling in postgraduate studies may be a very useful way to stay connected with the latest developments in the profession. While in the past distance education often required some attendance on campus by students, today's suite of online degrees and continuing professional development activities offer many options including fully online courses.

In geographically remote areas it is important for the library professional association to be active and supported by members, probably more so than in metropolitan areas. According to Abram,<sup>5</sup> library professional associations exist for three main purposes: to provide networking opportunities for members, to provide professional development opportunities, and to provide a vehicle for advocacy on behalf of the profession and library users. The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) has a number of branches in Western Australia: Academic and Research Libraries (WA), ALIA WA Library Technicians, ALIAWest, and ALIA Mentoring Program (WA).

**Table 2: ALIA Branches in Western Australia**

Group Name	Purpose
ALIAWest	Co-ordinates and communicates strategic professional issues and organises continuing professional development activities across the large state of Western Australia. Co-ordinates a social and networking program across groups in WA.
ALIA Academic & Research Libraries (WA)	Is a forum for tertiary, research and academic librarians to discuss ideas and practices and foster collaboration.
ALIA Mentoring Program (WA)	A facilitated mentoring program for members in Western Australia.
ALIA WA Library Technicians	Promotes ALIA and library technical activities, encouraging professional development and communication within the local area and nationally.

The author is convenor of ALIAWest<sup>18</sup> which is not sector-specific or aimed at a particular group of library professionals. It was formed in 2001 and introduced an online newsletter, held regular functions to keep members in touch, and maintained an Award<sup>19</sup> established by the Western Australia Branch Council for the most promising graduate each year. As a non sector-specific group, ALIAWest has a great deal of freedom in choosing event topics and themes and working collaboratively with other groups. Such a non-partisan group is important to a geographically remote region where there are fewer opportunities for professionals to network and attend relevant events.

One of ALIA's Principles<sup>20</sup> is: *Library and information professionals have a responsibility to commit to professional development and career-long learning.* Similarly, their employers and the Australian Library and Information Association have a responsibility to provide opportunities which enable library and information professionals to maintain excellent service delivery. ALIA encourages members to take responsibility for their own continuing professional development. The ALIA groups in Western Australia organise events and activities which provide many continuing professional development opportunities for members. ALIAWest for example, has been exploring the



concept of an 'unconference'<sup>21</sup> and is likely to facilitate such an event during 2007 in association with the State Library of Western Australia.

## **TECHNIQUES FOR LIBRARY ORGANISATIONS TO MINIMISE GEOGRAPHIC ISOLATION**

One strategy to ensure library staff will be interested in seeking employment in a regional setting, is for library staff to participate in the professional community, to become known and convey the attitudes and values of their home library. In this way, when a library is recruiting, librarians from other regions already know about it and may be interested in applying for the position.

Co-operative activities also help to minimise the isolation experienced in geographically remote regions. One example in Western Australia is the Skills for Teaching and Learning (STIL) Advisory Group.<sup>22</sup> This group is a collaboration between the five Western Australia universities: Curtin, Edith Cowan, Murdoch, Notre Dame, and UWA. Representatives from each university library develop and maintain learning resources for reference librarians to develop their teaching skills. It is important for libraries to support staff participation in such activities by way of release from work to participate, and the use of work resources and time to organise events.

Teleconferencing provides opportunities for librarians in remote and isolated regions to participate in real-time discussions. Burke, Dazkiw and Sheridan<sup>12</sup> describe the use of teleconference equipment augmented by software which allows staff to view remotely the screen of another computer workstation. The adoption of innovations such as this is crucial in addressing the 'tyranny of distance'.

## **LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AT UWA LIBRARY**

The preceding sections outline the geographic isolation of the state of Western Australia, the context within which the University of Western Australia operates. Situated as it is in the most remote capital city in the world, the University deals with the realities of geographic isolation every day. As an essential part of the University, the UWA Library is also challenged by the constraints of such isolation and this requires library managers to be creative in attracting, retaining and developing leaders. This section outlines one strategy adopted by the UWA Library to develop leadership amongst its existing staff.

Stephens and Russell<sup>23</sup> pose the question “what is good leadership?” They admit it is difficult to define leadership and consequently difficult to design programmes for developing the leaders of the future. Nevertheless, the University of Western Australia Library has designed a continuing professional development programme for senior library staff titled *Taking the Lead*. This programme is designed to ensure that library managers have the skills and knowledge required to drive the required changes and achieve positive and high performance workplaces.

In 2006 The University of Western Australia published the document *Working at The University of Western Australia – Expectations of staff in leadership and management roles*.<sup>24</sup> In general it requires leaders and managers to be innovative and committed to high performance in their own work and to encourage it in others. In a fast changing and more demanding environment it is essential that all managers, including library managers, have and use the broad range of skills required by the University.

Members of the millennial generation now form the majority of users at the University of Western Australia Library. Described as the “demographic tsunami that will permanently and irreversibly change the library and information landscape”,<sup>25</sup> these users have greater expectations of library services than perhaps previous generations of students demonstrated. New library services and new ways of delivering these services demand a management team that is forward-thinking, pro-active and ready to lead staff in addressing the challenges that change involves. As the solutions to satisfying client needs become increasingly expensive it is also important that operational efficiencies are achieved through prudent management. *Transforming the Organisation* is one theme within the UWA Library’s Strategic Plan<sup>26</sup> and *Taking the Lead* forms one of the projects within this theme.

*Taking the Lead* identifies the management skills required by individual library staff at level 7 (2) and above and delivers the training required to address their skills gap. The identification of the management skills gap utilises a 360-degree feedback instrument and a behavioural style inventory. A 360-degree feedback instrument combines evaluations of the programme participants by their supervisors, peers, and the staff who report directly to them. The feedback is voluntary, anonymous and confidential and the tool employed by UWA Library uses an on-line questionnaire, the Quality Leadership Profile (QLP)<sup>26</sup> developed by Queensland University of Technology specifically for the

university context. The report received by each participant includes the average scores for managers from the higher education sector throughout Australia. These scores can be used as a baseline against which an individual's response can be compared.

DiSC Classic<sup>27</sup> was used as a behavioural style inventory. It is designed to be self-scored and self-interpreted because the respondent is regarded as the expert on him or herself. It is a tool designed to help an individual develop a broader understanding of their behavioural tendencies and those of others. This instrument divides behaviour into four dimensions:

- **Dominance:** Direct and Decisive. D's are strong-willed, strong-minded people who like accepting challenges, taking action, and getting immediate results
- **Influence:** Optimistic and Outgoing. I's are 'people people' who like participating on teams, sharing ideas, and energizing and entertaining others.
- **Steadiness:** Sympathetic and Cooperative. S's are helpful people who like working behind the scenes, performing in consistent and predictable ways, and being good listeners.
- **Conscientiousness:** Concerned and Correct. C's are sticklers for quality and like planning ahead, employing systematic approaches, and checking and re-checking for accuracy.

The programme also identifies which skills are best addressed in a group setting, determines a training plan for each participant, sources and schedules the training, evaluates the project including a repeat of the 360-degree feedback process for each participant and provides an ongoing forum for participants to discuss management issues. The ongoing forum, titled *Leading into the Weekend* is a monthly Friday afternoon one-hour session. All participants take turns organising the event; these vary widely and include guest speakers, discussion of leadership case studies, and experiential opportunities in leadership. The very act of organising a session for peers around the issue of leadership is of itself an opportunity to demonstrate leadership.

One important aspect of the programme is the support from senior Library managers. When launching the programme, the University Librarian indicated

that he and his executive team would participate fully. This contributed to universal 'buy-in' to the voluntary programme.

*Taking the Lead* commenced in August 2006 and is expected to run through to August 2007, so no formal evaluation has yet been conducted. In preparing a nomination for an Australian Industry Training Development Award, however, participants were asked to comment on any notable differences they had observed, any lessons they had learnt, and what they would do differently next time. Many staff commented on how useful the DiSC behavioural style inventory was, especially for understanding colleagues' communication styles and their ability to work more effectively with a variety of people. Some staff noted that they were attempting to adjust their own communication style in an effort to accommodate the various styles of their colleagues and staff in their teams. Reactions to the 360-degree feedback exercise were mostly cautious. A few staff noted that the report they received was the basis of useful conversations with their immediate supervisors. One observed, after discussing the feedback with her supervisor, that a comment she had taken as critical was seen in a more positive light, possibly even as a complement on her management style. In commenting on the overall programme, one staff member described it as "useful, enjoyable and even, dare I say, inspirational".

Towards the end of the project, participants will repeat the 360-degree feedback exercise. This is intended to provide an opportunity for individuals to monitor any changes and improvements in their behaviour on-the-job. It will also provide participants and their supervisors, with useful information to discuss during the University's performance and professional development review procedure, the annual Professional Development Reviews. A further intention of the programme is for participants to gain improved insight into their leadership style and role in the organisation and to foster the leadership skills of all those in leadership positions. It is hoped that those new to leadership will develop greater skill and confidence, and those who have been leaders for some time, will be exposed to new ideas, inspiration, and greater understanding. In this way, the UWA Library is proactively developing and 'growing' their own leaders, and retaining staff who might otherwise seek opportunities elsewhere.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has explored some of the challenges faced by librarians and information professionals living and working in geographically remote areas.

Examples from the author's own experience living and working in Perth, Western Australia, have formed a basis for identifying how individuals and employers can address some of the issues that overcome the 'tyranny of distance'. Employers have the added challenge of attracting, retaining and developing staff with the right skill set and aptitude.

Leadership is a particular issue for the library and information profession because of the anticipated gap which will be created by large numbers retiring over the next ten to fifteen years. Succession planning is an activity that increasing numbers of libraries and professional associations are starting to address.

Unpacking the issues which geographic remoteness presents, perhaps provides an opportunity to see a way forward, and to suggest ways of minimising the isolation. Identifying the issues and starting to address them in forums such as this international one, provides a better opportunity to identify some of the answers.

The library and information profession needs people who are willing to be leaders. To step out in front and successfully take a leadership position requires courage, confidence, and a significant level of self awareness. Without such individuals as leaders, the library profession may dwindle and disappear as a result of the combined effects of a significant number of retirements and the lower numbers of students enrolling in library degrees.

It is our responsibility to demonstrate librarianship as an interesting and challenging career choice and to foster and support staff who could enrol in a course of study to qualify as librarians. It is also our responsibility to encourage and support those who may be the library leaders of tomorrow. They need challenging opportunities to realise the leadership potential they hold; they need support from employers and mentors to take advantage of those opportunities; and they need role models who demonstrate a variety of leadership styles.

Most importantly, we need to be audacious in our approach to succession planning and leadership development. In not responding to this issue, libraries may wither into 'dignified irrelevance'.<sup>26</sup> Instead, let us be proactive rather than reactive; let us take the initiative and create the future we would like to see.

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- <sup>21</sup> The principles of the unconference are:

- Whoever comes is the right person
- Whatever happens, that's the way it's supposed to happen
- Whenever it starts, it's the right time to start
- When it's over it's over

Modelled on Library Camps held in 2006 in the US, the idea is that participants shape the agenda and are responsible for the day. An unconference focuses on who's going to be at the event and what they're interested in. The organisers provide space, enough blank surfaces to write on so that people can self-organise, and a general theme for the day.

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